

War's Ghosts: A Soldier's Way Home

Within a matter of days after the end of the Civil War, soldiers were plunged back into the civilian life so suddenly that it came as a shock for everyone; soldiers were not the same people they had been when they had gone off to war. The public welcomed them back with open arms, but for the Army of the Potomac, parading through the capital was the last command of a long arduous war (Linderman 269). Even black soldiers went home in victory, as shown in Alfred Waud's *African American Soldiers Mustered Out at Little Rock, Arkansas*; yet they "...felt that they had returned from another world..."(267). However, civilians had difficulty understanding the altered views of veterans who had seen war for what it was. America's war was over, but its soldiers were left with battles of a different kind: addiction, physical disabilities, soldier's heart and nostalgia, and public image. Despite the many negative side effects of the long campaign, some grew with the experience while for the majority trying to regain the simple life they had set aside, became a struggle that would take years to overcome.

A common practice, at the time, was to prescribe opiates for major injuries sustained during battle or extended prison life, because of this it was a common factor among homebound soldiers to return home with addictions to morphine and opium. Once home, doctors did nothing to stop the use of opiates. The narcotics were legal and often prescribed for pain or problems with sleeping. As a result, any soldiers who had not become addicted during the war were at high risk to follow their compatriots due to reintegration issues. The few that became aware and admitted to their addiction found trying to quit meant fighting withdrawal systems. Ultimately, the prescribed cure became a soldier's poison.

In comparison, opiate addiction was minor to the hardships of amputations. Losing a limb only added to the struggle of finding work after returning home, because of its effect on their ability to perform physical labor. It was already hard for those who had been lucky enough to escape the war without debilitating injuries, but with one it was almost impossible: especially in the North. The fundamental issue was that slavery's dissolution had sent newly emancipated slaves into the northern states where they inundated the lower class working positions. Soldiers unable to find work became wards of the state in one form or another, either by wandering from soldier home to soldier home or settling on land in the west.

In addition, superior weapons left resounding after effects for people like Edson Bemis, who spent years in a fragile state of health after receiving, "a traumatic head wound from a conoidal musket ball..." (Sharp, Wing). After his family could no longer provide care for him at home, he was committed to Westboro Insane Hospital along with a multitude of others. Missing limbs were constant reminders of what they had seen and lost in the war. The trauma of losing a limb alone is enough to leave someone with lasting mental scars, and records show many veterans exhibited what was referred to as soldier's heart or nostalgia. These two main models were used to explain the various changes in the returning men that modern medicine now attributes to PTSD; Soldier's heart was physiological, whereas nostalgia was psychological (Friedman). Without proper knowledge, their families sent them to mental institutions to remain indefinitely. Caring for a disabled soldier was a financial burden and sometimes veterans were committed, despite the absence of mental illnesses, in order for their family to access a pension. As a result, home became something different than what soldiers had longed for during the long campaign.

Confederate men such as Lt. Gen. James Longstreet suffered criticism from a southern movement called The Lost Cause; a name coined after historian Edward A. Pollard published *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates*. Formed in the years following the war's end, it allowed white southerners to cope with their losses by refusing to accept they had lost the war on accounts of inferior strategy. They instead claimed it was due to "...overwhelming force," or "factors beyond their control..." (Mesch). Its followers strived to paint the "Confederacy's leaders as exemplars of old-fashioned chivalry..." (Mesch) and despite Lee's acceptance of the blame for the defeat, followers refused to let the deified idol of their movement take the fall for their loss. Some went as far as to transfer the blame onto men like Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, who was accused "by Jubal Early, William Pendleton, Rev. J William Jones, and others" ("James Longstreet"), of failing to follow Lee's orders to attack on the morning of July 2, 1863. Public views such as these only served to exasperate the veterans' reintegration.

In contrast, some military men regained their balance in society and went on to become businessmen like J.E. Hanger, the founder of Hanger Inc. As the first amputee of the Civil War, he took the universal dissatisfaction with the cumbersome peg legs and designed a new type of prosthetic. March 23, 1863, marked his first patent for the "Artificial Leg" (Hanger). Modifications to the original model caught the attention of the Association for the Relief of Maimed Soldiers. Impressed, they commissioned J.E. Hanger to supply other amputees with his new artificial limb. This kicked off an arms race in the prosthetics industry that has lasted even until today and goes to show how men like Hanger took their misfortune and used it to support their fellow veterans through industry.

In a similar manner, others went on to become politicians; such as Andrew Jackson, Thomas Meagher, William McKinley, and Ulysses S. Grant, whose election was publicized as a Union victory. (“Union Thunder.”) Not all of them went into politics willingly, as was the case with Grant; in a letter to William Tecumseh Sherman, he stated, “I have been forced into it in spite of myself” (Grant 292). His military background did not allow him the rest that others had, once home. Republicans demanded that he be more and he could not refuse. After his election, there was much speculation about whether or not he beat Seymour “on account of his military prestige and popularity...” (“Explaining It and Hoping for Crumbs”). This demonstrates that because of what they’d been through, men in similar situations were given the opportunity or forced to grow from their experiences and be a part of reconstructing America.

On the other end of the spectrum, some soldiers coped by keeping their silence; struggles with returning home were not to be aired for the ears of others, nor did they feel their wounds were things to be bragged about. Only in the presence of other veterans, did a few of them speak but briefly and shallowly about what they had all seen. Grief muffled public curiosity about the war and the few attempts made to draw attention to it failed. Newspapers, whose fame had extended beyond the war’s end, published little to no articles on the subject. Any books were far from successful (Linderman 271). It seemed that the war would remain where the soldiers had laid it to rest.

However, in the 1880’s public curiosity was rekindled, and as soldiers began to commemorate the war, public ritual and veteran celebration became entangled. Veterans regained their lost confidence and began to consider that their survival could not have been chance; they must have had something the others had not, something must have set them apart. Civil War books became wildly popular, as well as a particular magazine series from *Century*

called “Battles and Leaders of the Civil War.” Struggling military groups like The Grand Army of the Republic and Odd Fellows had an inrush of new members. A soldier’s separation from the regular citizen was once again pulled into the spotlight, but this time it was a source of pride (Linderman 275-350). Rev. Dr. J. William Jones gave a fine example of veterans’ changed views when in his introduction speech for the unveiling of the A.P. Hill Monument, his description of the private soldier was “...as true patriots as the world ever saw,” (Jones). It took fifteen years but in the end, soldiers once again embraced the idea of the “martial past,” (Linderman 274).

Undeniably, a Civil War veteran’s journey to finally feeling at home was far from easy. War was over for the country, but not for them. They still had personal battles to be fought in the form of estrangement, disabilities that followed them home, and a silence deemed necessary to leave their memories in the mist. After a fifteen year long silence, their estrangement became a matter of pride and what had once fueled their reluctance to speak became the subject of fond reminiscence.

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